

BUB BOWIE

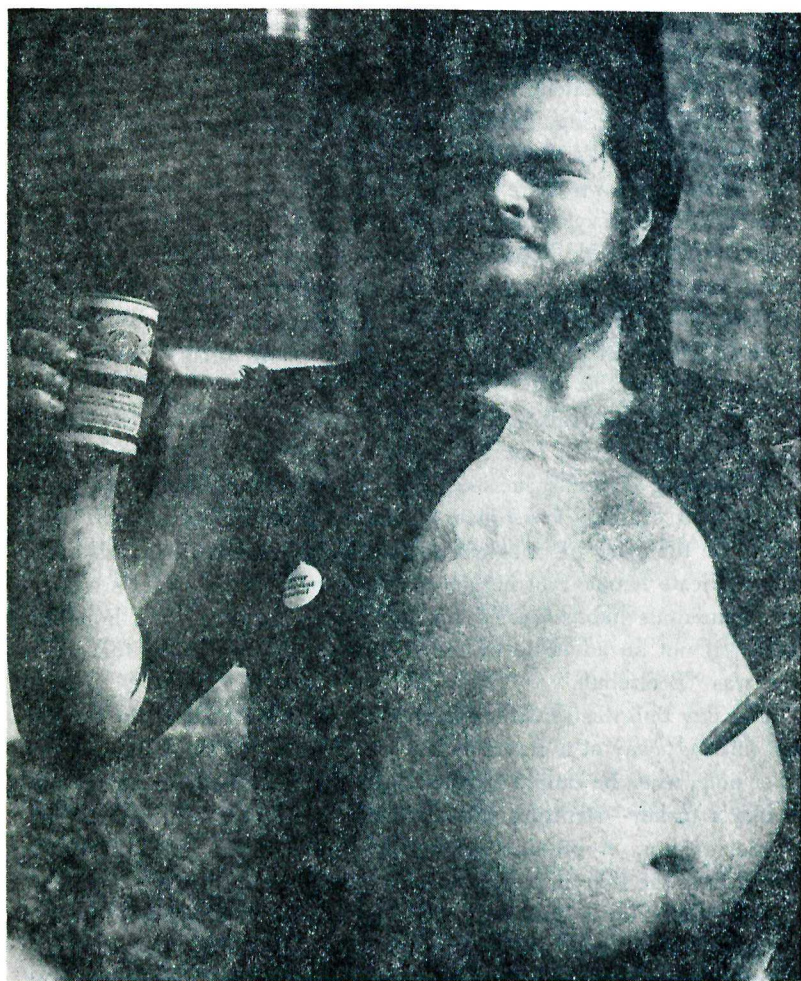
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[Found among the papers of the late Bartholomew Dibble, past Overseer of Christ the Healer Tabernacle and Secretary of the Mt. Ararat Historical Society. His researches concerning the background of the town have been collected in a small volume entitled *Hark Ye to the Ark*, which made the Good Book Association's best-seller list in 1931. The old patriarch died shortly after its publication. In spite of the somewhat heretical nature of certain passages, his memory is held dear by the townsfolk, who have gone so far as to spin his likeness into the doily dust-covers manufactured in the lace factory, thus assuring him a kind of immortality on earth as well as in Heaven. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . ."]

Whoever visits Mt. Ararat, Illinois, cannot fail to notice the imposing spire of Christ the Healer Tabernacle. The uplifted finger of admonition dominates the town, points out the path to salvation for the farmers in the surrounding plain, and even serves as a spiritual landmark for navigators on Lake Michigan—whenever the fog withdraws its misty breath.

The town itself was founded on the lake by Joshua Powers and his 5000 disciples in 1901 as a theocracy of the Divine Healing Society. A flood of anti-smoking, anti-drinking zeal swept this ark of crusading Christians away from the corrupt and sinful city of Chicago to a land of milk and honey. The lake, symbolic remnant of that flood, still laps at the east side of town as a reminder of God's providential deliverance.

At the center of town, the limestone tabernacle has sent down its roots to take a strong hold in its ten-acre grounds. Solid, immovable, enduring, it represents the fixed beliefs of the citizens. In contrast to the silent, unchanging tabernacle, the business district bustles with the industry of hard-working merchants. Except for the conspicuous absence of any taverns, drugstores, or medical offices, it is typical of most Midwestern downtowns. Closer to the lake, the



famous lace factory, worked by skilled artisans imported from England, drones with contented activity.

The rest of the town, from Aaron Avenue to Zebulun Drive, is laid out in streets as straight and narrow as the residents of the modest homes along them. Pale chimney smoke, the only kind of smoking permitted under the municipal ordinances, rises like incense from these pious homes, imparting, as it halos the church spire, an ethereal quality to Mt. Ararat's skyline.

In this very town there lived, not many years after the death of Joshua Powers, a lazy, good-for-nothing young rogue by the name of "Bub" Bowie. Yes, he lived in Mt. Ararat, but no one could tell you exactly where, although it was a well-known source of consternation that Bud could frequently be found at midnight in the graveyard by the water, communing with "spirits" (of the fluid form) behind the stones.

Certain it is that Bub was hardly a great favorite among the good wives of the village. In fact, his eating of forbidden bacon; his practice of smoking cigarettes across from the schoolyard, where an awe-struck crowd of little worshippers gathered round after school; and (perish the thought) his insolent spitting on the sidewalk in full view of any delicate female that happened along, even the overseer's wife—these scandalous habits gained for him the reputation of a hopeless heathen, if not an advocate of the Devil himself, for Bub's full nickname was "Beelzebub."

One day Bub was slouching against the shingled wall of the barber shop, puffing away at a cigarette and lazily watching the twists of the barber pole, when he caught sight of Sister Naomi Plott coming toward him like a turkey—strutting with difficulty owing to her over-stuffed posterior region. A mischievous smirk spread over half of Bub's freckled face, the side turned away from Sister Naomi, as he recognized the opportunity for a little fun. She had seen him—he could tell by her pained attempt to avoid looking his way. Just as she reached him, Bub collected all the saliva he could suck in, slid the pool to the front of his mouth, and spat out the juicy missile. It landed in a perfect slimy puddle on the ruffled hem of Sister Naomi's long dress. Furiously she whirled on him, her crooked arthritic finger going off at all angles before the tip finally pointed at his nose.

"God will punish you, you little heathen," she cried shrilly, her

flabby red neck quivering back and forth like a turkey's. "God will shower his vehemence upon you." Which was precisely what she was doing to him as she spluttered and spat angrily in his face. "Tonight, young man, tonight you will reap what you deserve!" With that warning, Sister Naomi smoothed her ruffled feathers and stalked off indignantly. Bub just stood there and laughed in a jeering falsetto.

That night, heedless of Sister Naomi's warning, Bub cradled a bottle in his arms and set out for the graveyard just as the full moon slid into the sky like a pat of melting butter in a hot skillet. He wriggled between the wrought-iron rails of the fence and settled himself in the long shadow of the towering marble monument of Joshua Powers. Bub took in the scene before him. The eerie light of the moon gave long black tails to the attentive gravestones, which seemed to be perked up like startled cats in apprehension of something supernatural. On the lake, the waves rushed in silently, betraying their presence only by the moonbeams bouncing to and fro on their crests. The silver stillness was strange.

Bub shivered, popped the cork on his bottle, and tilted his head to receive the warming liquid. But suddenly, before the glass touched his lips, the sky shattered with lightning and thunder, the lake began to slurp like a ravenous wolf licking its chops, and a mighty hand reached down to snatch the bottle away. Cowering with fear, Bub looked up and found himself small and insignificant beneath, not the stone, but the towering form of Joshua Powers himself, garbed in black!

"Bub Bowie!" The commanding voice rolled with the thunder. "God's finger of accusation points at your heart, and his wrath hangs over your head like a tangled nest crawling with hundreds of tiny, contorting, ooze-skinned, hard-jawed worms, all eager to infest your body and eat it away.

"O, you sinner, consider the terrible fate which awaits you on that final Judgment Day, when in a *second* God can consign you to *eternal* torment in Hell. There a perpetual, pounding stampede of full-grown elephants will trample you forever into a mangled pulp. Look at the mighty wrath of God, deserving sinner, and gnash your teeth!

"And yet, O wicked one, there is no need for despair. Salvation lies in obedience to God. I exhort you, be on fire for the Lord! He needs laborers for the vineyard, soldiers for the crusade. He is calling *you*, Bub Bowie, to spread the Good News to the wicked cities of the

earth. Are you willing to go? All you have to say is, 'Here am I; send me.' "

Terrified, Bub sat rigid under the spell of such powerful eloquence; he couldn't speak.

Thunder crashed. "The worms are wriggling to escape. They're ready to drop on your unprotected head. What is your answer? Now!"

Bub started and took his thumb out of his mouth. "Here am I; send me," he quavered. Immediately all was still, just as before, only the moon had climbed overhead and Bub no longer sat in shadow.

Ever since the storm, no one in Mt. Ararat was ever troubled by Bub again. He had disappeared, with no clue as to his whereabouts, except that Sister Naomi insisted she heard a familiar voice that night—crying in frenzy through the newly-washed air—"I'm off to convert New York!"

Even to this day the townspeople, who have built up quite a legend around this little clue, never hear a thunderstorm of a summer evening but they say Joshua Powers has stirred from his grave to convert a hardened sinner.

